

# Liminal deity

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A **liminal deity** is a god or goddess in mythology who presides over thresholds, gates, or doorways; "a crosser of boundaries".<sup>[1]</sup> Special types include dying-and-rising deities, various agricultural deities, and those who descend into the underworld: crossing the threshold between life and death representing the most fundamental of all boundaries. Vegetation deities in particular mimic the annual dying and returning of plant life, making them seasonally cyclical liminal deities. In contrast, the one-time ordeal typical of the dying-and-rising myth, or legends of those who return from a descent to the underworld, represent a more narrow scope of liminal deities.



Evelyn de Morgan - Mercury, 1870-1873

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## Etymology

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The word "liminal", first attested to in English in 1884, comes from the Latin word "limen", meaning "threshold".<sup>[2]</sup> "Liminality" is a term given currency in twentieth century anthropology by Victor Turner of the University of Chicago.

## In modern religion

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### Christianity

Liminal existence can be located in a separate sacred space. The Ladder of Jacob is a ladder to heaven, which was presented in a dream of Jacob.

In such a liminal space, the individual experiences the revelation of the sacred knowledge in which God confers the knowledge of the person.<sup>[3]</sup>

In Christianity Jesus is presented as a crosser of borders:<sup>[4][5][6]</sup>

Jesus said in John 1:51 "And he saith unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Hereafter ye shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of man." This statement has been interpreted as associating or implicating Jesus with the mythical ladder, in that Christ bridges the gap between Heaven and Earth. Jesus presents himself as the reality to which the ladder points.

Crucifixion darkness is an episode described in three of the canonical gospels in which the sky becomes dark during the day, during the crucifixion of Jesus as a sign of his divinity.<sup>[7][8][9]</sup>

The pre-existence of Christ is one of the relevant passages in the Bible on this subject is John 1: 1-18, where, in the Trinitarian vision, Christ is identified with the pre-existing divine hypostasis called Logos or Word. This doctrine is supported in John 17: 5 when Jesus refers to the glory he had with the Father "before the world existed" during the farewell speech. John 17:24 also refers to the Father who loves Jesus "before the foundation of the world."<sup>[10]</sup>

The New Testament has God declaring himself to be the "Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, the first and the last". Thus, the phrase "I am the alpha and the omega" is further clarified with the additional phrase, "the beginning and the end" in Revelation 21:6, 22:13. The first and last letters of the Greek alphabet were used because the book of Revelation is in the New Testament.<sup>[11][12]</sup>



Resurrection, by Luca Giordano,  
after 1665

## List of liminal deities

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### European

#### ■ Greek mythology

- Adonis
- Dionysus, who in one myth is torn apart by Titans, but brought back to life
- Enodia, goddess of crossroads
- Hecate, goddess of magic and crossroads
- Hermes, god of roads, merchants, travelers, trade, thievery/thieves, cunning, and animal husbandry; messenger of Zeus and psychopomp<sup>[13]</sup>
- Iris, goddess of the rainbow and messenger of Hera, could travel to Hades and return
- Persephone, is technically a liminal deity due to spending part of her time in the underworld and the rest above ground, and often seen as a goddess of spring and new growth

#### Roman mythology

- Bacchus, Roman name for Dionysus
- Cardea, goddess of health, thresholds, and door hinges and handles
- Diana, as Diana Trivia she serves as the goddess of three-way crossroads and the underworld; often equated with the Greek Hecate

- Forculus, Lima, and Limentinus, minor deities of thresholds or doorways; see indigitamenta
- Janus, dual-faced god of gates, doors, doorways, beginnings and endings, for whom January is named
- Mercury, messenger god and psychopomp; equivalent to the Greek Hermes and shares several of his functions, such as being a god of commerce, travelers, merchants, and thieves
- Portunus, god of keys, doors, and livestock
- Proserpina, Roman equivalent of Persephone who spent some of her time living in the world of the dead
- Terminus, god who protected boundary markers

## **Norse mythology**

- Gná, Frigg's personal messenger; she rode the horse Hofvarpnir who could travel over both sea and sky
- Heimdall
- Hermóðr, messenger of the Norse gods; he rode to Hel to plead for Baldr's return, ultimately being unsuccessful
- Odin, god of war and death, among other things; he is described as at least once visiting the underworld on Sleipnir, raising a volva to interrogate, and visiting jotunn on three occasions in their domain in order to gather more wisdom

## **Baltic mythology**

- Užsparinė, Lithuanian goddess of land borders

## **Asian religions**

### **Chinese mythology**

- Chen Huang Shen, the god of walls and moats
- Menshen, the gods of doors
- Chen Wenlong, god of city walls in Fuzhou
- Fan Zeng, god of city walls in Hezhou and He county
- Guan Ying, god of city walls in Longxing, Gan, Yuan, Jiang, Ji, Jianchang, Linjiang, Nanchang, and Nankang
- Huang Xie, god of city walls in Suzhou
- Huo Guang, Yu Bo, and Chen Huacheng; gods of city walls in Shanghai
- Ji Shun, god of city walls in Zhengzhou, Zhenjiang, Qingyuan, Ningguo, Taiping, Xiangyang, Xingyuan, Fuzhou, Nan'an, and Huating
- Jian Yi, god of city walls in Tanghongzhou
- Jiao Ming, god of city walls in Ezhou
- Liu Zhongyuan, god of city walls in Liuzhou
- Pang Yu, god of city walls in Xiaoxing
- Qu Tan, god of city walls in Taizhou
- Shen Sheng, god of city walls in Wuzhou
- Su Jian, god of city walls in Yongzhou

- Te Xuan, god of city walls in Jinan
- Wen Tianxiang, god of city walls in Huangzhou
- Xiao He, god of city walls in Gu
- Yang Jianshan, god of city walls in Beijing
- Yao Yichung, god of city walls in Xingguojun
- Ying Bu, god of city walls in Zhenzhou and Liuhe
- Ying Zhixu, god of city walls in Yunzhou
- Zhou Ke, god of city walls in Jiangyin
- Zhu Yogui, god of city walls in Xiaonanmen

### **Filipino mythology**

- Makiubaya: the Ifugao divinities who watch over the gates of the village<sup>[14]</sup>
- Manduyapit: the Manobo god who ferries departed souls across the red river before going to the afterworld<sup>[15]</sup>

### **Korean mythology**

- Jangseung, a totem pole traditionally placed at the edges of villages to mark for village boundaries and frighten away demons; also worshipped as tutelary deities
- Munsin, Korean deity of the door. He was considered one of the most powerful of the house gods (Gashin), especially in Jeju Island.

### **Shinto**

- Izanagi, creator god who descended into Yomi to bring back his wife, only to be repulsed at how hideous she had become, run away, and seal the entrance to Yomi with a rock
- Izanami, creator goddess who died, but could not leave Yomi and thus became queen of the underworld and the dead

### **Hinduism**

- Agni, god of fire and messenger between gods and mortals, Ganesha seems to have at least partially taken over this role in modern Hinduism
- Ganesha, remover of obstacles, a messenger of the gods and goddesses who must be propitiated before any of the other deities<sup>[16]</sup>
- Pushan, solar deity and psychopomp responsible for marriages, journeys, roads, the feeding of cattle, and overseeing the journey of the dead to the afterlife

### **Mesopotamian mythology**

- Dumuzi/Tammuz
- Inanna/Ishtar

### **Phrygian mythology**

- Attis

### **Middle East and Abrahamic religions**

- Jesus Christ

# African and American religions

## ■ African religions

- Osiris, ancient Egyptian god who was murdered, but was reassembled and brought back to life by his wife Isis, but was still confined to the underworld and became the ruler of it
- Legba, phallic crossroad spirit and trickster in West African Vodun, he is the bringer of magic, master diviner and speaker of every language who facilitates communication between man and the gods. Legba is also the remover of obstacles and the guardian of the home and crossroads.

## Afro-American religions

- Elegua, the messenger god and psychopomp in Santería, Louisiana Voodoo, Haitian Vodou, and Candomblé

## See also

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- Dying-and-rising deity – Religious motif in which a deity dies and is resurrected
- Katabasis – Descent of some type
- Liminal being – Being that cannot be easily placed into a single category of existence
- Psychopomp – Entity believed to escort deceased souls to an afterlife
- Vegetation deity – Nature deity who embodies the growth cycle of plants
- Tutelary deity – Guardian/patron deity or spirit
- Gate guardian – Symbolic guardian at a military facility
- Household deity – Deity or spirit associated with the home

## Notes

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